

Empowering Art

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I AM A FEMINIST, an artist, and a former migrant worker.

I always wanted to draw and paint since I was a child. But the pursuit of my dream of becoming a visual artist ended when I had to work abroad because of poverty. I and my four siblings were neglected by our parents after my father returned home as an Overseas Filipino Worker in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s.

As the eldest child, I chose to work for my family. But I also tried to study at the same time. I studied fine arts and majored in interior design at the University of the East Caloocan City, Philippines from 1998 to 2000 because I wanted to become a designer or artist. But I had to give up my education when I was seventeen years old when I decided to go to Japan in 2000 to work as an overseas performing artist (OPA). As an OPA in Japan, I experienced different kinds of harassment and abuse that led me to pursue my fight as an individual. When I met people from Batis-AWARE in 2015 and heard the stories of women and children who were suffering from lack of support from their Japanese husbands/partners or fathers, I decided to work for the rights of the migrant women who returned to the Philippines with their children, who were mostly abandoned by their fathers. I also became interested in supporting the transnational children.¹

After a decade of working in Japan, I returned to the Philippines for good. In 2014, I started to paint in my own studio, Yllang Artworks. I also became an active book illustrator, designer, layout artist, writer and editor registered with the National Book Development Board.

I am currently taking a course on fine arts majoring in painting at the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

I also became a member of Linangan ng Kulturang Pilipino, visual artist section, an organization that promotes nationalist culture and KASIBULAN (Kababaihan para sa Bagong Sibol na Kamalayan) an all women artists' organization of the Philippines.

Migrants Advocacy through Art

In the Philippines, I became interested in the plight of Filipino women who have children with Japanese men. Some of them were married to Japanese men, similar to my case. Having known the Batis Center for Women (Batis), a Philippine non-governmental organization focusing on Filipino migrant women, I volunteered to join the center.

I was elected President in 2015 of an organization supported by Batis consisting of migrant women. This was the Association of Women in Action for Rights and Empowerment (Batis-AWARE). I supported the programs of Batis-AWARE regarding the following:

1. Breaking down barriers to access to justice for women survivors of domestic violence and trafficking in the guise of marriage (affected by expensive and tedious process of judicial recognition of foreign divorce)

This program includes legal consultation and exploratory discussions with concerned government agencies and legal professionals in the Philippines regarding marriages between Filipino women and Japanese men that are considered trafficking cases. The women receive legal support in having their divorce obtained in Japan judicially recognized in the Philippines in the proper and least expensive manner.

2. Struggling against the trafficking of Japanese-Filipino children and Filipino mothers to Japan; and women domestic workers to the Middle East particularly Lebanon

This program covers self-development and empowerment activities for Japanese-Filipino children through their organization (Batis-YOGHI) such as summer camps, organizational meetings, discussion of issues, cultural exchange and exposure activities for members of networks of supporters from Japan.

It also covers

- Capacity-building and skills-training activities for the members of Batis-AWARE on livelihood and entrepreneurship, and organizational development;
- Empowerment of the members of Batis-AWARE through networking and advocacy activities using art and publications;

- Serving as resource persons on trafficking and domestic violence issues, healing and rebuilding of life (through sharing of life experience) as part of network activities; and
 - Organizing of returned women migrant workers to become members of Batis-AWARE.
3. Promoting safe migration and ethical recruitment (discouraging shortcuts to migration, information drive on the legal process of migration and ethical recruitment to minimize vulnerability to trafficking).

In March 2016, fifteen women including myself joined a creative writing workshop facilitated by Chingbee Cruz, a professor at the University of the Philippines, a poet and Trustee of Batis-AWARE. In the workshop, we simply wrote down our experiences working abroad, as if we were writing daily journals. We also started composing poems from these experiences. In the end, all participants started to realize the importance of writing.

I recounted our fears in joining this workshop:²

Writing was a tough one, I along with 15 women of Batis AWARE, were excited and [at the same time] nervous that day. Not all of the women of Batis-AWARE [had] the capability and courage to express their own experiences through writing, so some of the women did illustrations and poetry to summarize their stories. ...[S]ome women [were] afraid and ashamed to write their past experiences, some also [pitied] themselves [as they recalled their experiences]. I was scared that people, the readers, might know my past, mis[understand] my situation and be judged.

As an illustrator, I also facilitated a separate workshop on the use of art to add illustrations to the writings. But not all members of Batis-AWARE were interested in making drawings.

The Batis-AWARE women collectively decided to produce a magazine that would compile the writings and artworks produced in the creative writing workshop. We named the magazine *Daloy* (Flow). The first issue (*Daloy 1*) had fifty-six pages and was launched in August 2016. In 2018, Batis AWARE in collaboration with Youth and Beauty Brigade and Gantala Press published *Daloy 2*. The compositions in *Daloy 2* are more informative and dis-

cuss more deeply the issues of Batis-AWARE, such as being migrant workers, our rights as women, our battles in everyday life.

I saw the importance of writing while producing *Daloy*. Despite the weaknesses of Batis-aware, it was able to facilitate the dissemination of stories of vulnerabilities of women migrant workers which could also be testimonies of success. *Daloy* has become the voice of voiceless women in my community of migrant workers. Through writings and illustrations, Batis-aware provides a forum to express the emotions and problems of the women, as well as exposes issues on addressing the shortfall of the society and government and the current situations of women in the marginalized sector.³ I myself get empowered in the process of producing *Daloy*.

Daloy became an informative material for the advocacies of Batis-aware. It also helped the women in the empowerment program, with some of them becoming interested in writing. I also started to write and publish online issues at World Pulse. *Daloy* is also helping raise income for Batis-aware. Sale of *Daloy* has become a source of funds that would help sustain the activities of the organization.



Daloy magazine⁴

Advocacy Program

Inspired by the stories of the women in Batis-AWARE who survived human trafficking and other forms of human rights abuse, I decided to use my painting skills to empower the mothers and their children to share their stories through art.

I got an opportunity to use art to advocate for the betterment of migrant women when I did a mural entitled “Empowerment of all People” in a restaurant in Kobe city in 2016. This restaurant, named SALA Asian Shokudo, was established with the help of migrant women in the city. My connection to this restaurant started after I met a group of Japanese students from Kwansei Gakuin University in Hyogo prefecture during their visit to Batis-AWARE.

The mural, conceptualized by Mr Oku, the father of the owner (Ms Naoko Kuroda), gave me the power to continue to use art to fight for human rights. Some of my paintings are displayed in this restaurant.



"Empowerment of all People"⁵

A visitor in SALA Asian Shokudo describes the mural in the following manner:⁶

While scanning the room, my eyes were fixated on a mural on one side of the wall of a group of women of various complexion[s] in traditional dresses. This artwork was painted by Cecil a couple of years ago. The women exude strength as well as warmth and they embody the spirit written on the upper left corner of the mural, "empowerment for all."

To continue my support for migrants through art, I thought it would be good to empower communities through art. Empowerment Through Art basically facilitates interpretation of our experiences, frustrations, hopes and dreams through poetry and painting. Personally, the effect of creating something from my imagination and experience is liberating.

In April 2017, I set up Empowerment Through Art (ETA) for this purpose. ETA initially functioned as an awareness and fund-raising campaign vehicle for Batis-AWARE and for aspiring artists. ETA aims to empower people in distressed communities. It provides art workshop and art therapy to distressed women victim-survivors of all forms of human rights violations. I myself found out that interpreting memories (such as memories as a migrant worker) through painting has therapeutic effect.



Other paintings in SALA Asian Shokudo

I held art workshops in different places and each workshop generally involves several components:

- a. Teaching of
 - basic drawing concept
 - basic techniques on using the materials and dry media tools
 - basic painting techniques using wet media such as acrylic or water color paint;
- b. Introduction of “I am poetry” template to encourage to put in writing what they feel and think; and
- c. Transforming the words they formulated that prick the heart into artwork.

The art workshops include human rights as one of the themes of art work.

In 2017, I was alone in this journey. I organized everything by myself until 2018 when ETA became a group of fifteen self-taught and trained artists who wanted to advocate the rights of migrants and to promote awareness and change in the society through art.⁷ We collaborate with individuals, organizations, institutions to serve and empower people.

I introduced ETA activities to communities, organizations and academic institutions in the Philippines (such as Batis-AWARE, Buklod Tao, Homenet Cooperative, Pambansang Kongreso ng Kababaihan sa Kanayunan (National Rural Women Coalition, PKKK), UP SOLAIR, University of the Philippines Center for Women's and Gender Studies, Infant Jesus Academy, Philippine Commission on Human Rights, etc.) and abroad (such as Caritas Lebanon, SALA Asian Shokudo in Kobe city, Art Represent London, Vital Voices and World Pulse).



Art workshops.



Art workshop in a Caritas shelter in Lebanon.

Artist's Statement

Painting is my meditation, diary and main weapon in amplifying women's voice. I use my imagination and creativity using social artistry to create an impact and be a voice for the voiceless women in the society. I paint what is on my mind and in my heart. My interest in and work on women and chil-



"Si Berta at ang mga Bata"⁸

dren's empowerment concepts inspired me to create artworks out of the stories of women in my organization. I want my artworks to become the voices of migrant women and their children, testify to the issues that affect them but which the general public does not know fully about. I also create art out of frustration that I am poor and lack knowledge in painting. Because of this, I want to improve my craft so that I can also teach low-income people who cannot go to art school but have the talent and creativity. This is my way of helping them find their voice so that they can raise awareness and solve the problems affecting them, especially women and children from poor communities. I always want to develop myself as an artist and leader. I want to help people.

My art themes expanded from 2016 after Rodrigo Duterte became the President of the Philippines. Issues such as extra-judicial killing and misogyny became concepts of my artworks.

I still did not know that my art had assumed a feminist perspective until I did the mural project in Kobe city in 2016.

Since then my paintings have focused on feminist themes. I exhibited in several venues in cooperation with different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions such as the following:⁹

- “YLLANG Artworks (Women Empowerment) and Batis-AWARE,” 7th Philippine International Literacy Festival Against Forgetting, QCX Museum, Quezon City (April 2016);
- “Only women bleed,” in support of Gabriela and Linangan ng Kulturang Pilipino, Sikat Events, Quezon City (March 2017);
- BLTX Women and Queer small press expo, Better Living Through Xeroxography at UP Village, Quezon City (May 2017)
- 7 YLLANG Artworks, SALA Asian Shokudo, in Motomachi, Kobe, Japan (May 2017, ongoing);
- “Pangalagaan ang Kalikasan, Gawang Sining ng mga Kababaihan, Handog kay Petrona Nakpil-Bautista” (Protect the environment: Women's Artworks for Petrona Nakpil-Bautista), Bahay Nakpil-Bautista, Quiapo, Manila (17 – 30 September 2017);
- “Pagsibol, Adhikain Paghilom para kay Juana,” NRH Exhibit Hall, Far Eastern University, Manila (27 – 29 November 2017);
- “Rise up, Resist!: Art exhibit on Women's Strength and Resistance amid violence,” House of Representatives North Wing lobby, Quezon City (27 November - 7 December 2017);

- “Women Empowerment Through Art” featured Artist in celebration of Women’s Month, Local Water Utilities Administration complex, Quezon City (19 – 23 March 2018);
- “Philippine Heroines” with KASIBULAN (Kababaihan sa Sining at Bagong Sibol na Kamalayan), National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Manila (26 - 31 March 2018)
- “Empowerment Through Art: An Exhibit for a Cause for the Benefit of Batis-AWARE and YOGHI,” Ignition Venture Studio, Taguig city (6 April – 15 May 2018);
- “ETA: Pop Up ART Exhibit” in collaboration with Gabriela PH, Voices of Women for Justice and Peace and Commission on Human Rights, Commission on Human Rights, Quezon City (20 April 2018);
- “ETA’S PEARL ALEXANDRITE,” National Parks Development Committee, Museum and Archive Gallery at the Rizal Park, Manila (April 2018 – May 2019);
- “Empowerment Through Art Exhibit: Connecting Informal work and Unpaid Work,” an exhibit for the 13th anniversary event of Homenet Cooperative Philippines, in collaboration with Homenet and UP School of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City (6 May - 6 June 2018);
- “ETA’S MURAL: Equal Rights for Marginalized,” The School of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City (30 April 2018);
- “Kasibulan’s Mother’s Day exhibit: I am my Mother’s Heart,” START101 Gallery, Diliman, Quezon city (7 – 16 May 2018);
- “Empowerment Through Art Exhibit: Women and Children in the communities: Real Struggle,” in collaboration with Commission on Human Rights, Quezon City (9 - 31 July 2018);
- “Empowerment Through Art: Health and Protection for all Women,” an art exhibit for a cause in collaboration with UP Center for Women and Gender Studies and Homenet Cooperative Philippines, Magsaysay Ave, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City (24 September - 24 December 2018);
- “Narratives of Women Artists: When Empowering Women Becomes Truly Empowering,” in collaboration with University of

the Philippines and UP Center for Women's and Gender Studies, UP Diliman Quezon City (29 March 2019).

Challenges and Future Plans

I think the number one challenge in using art for empowerment is funding. I am glad that there are people and organizations who support and collaborate with ETA in its activities.

I really wanted to train women and children in art such as poetry and painting. I believe that women and children are creative. Everyone, every woman has a story to tell and art is a great way to express it.

After returning from a series of meetings in Japan in 2018,¹⁰ I thought of creating a place like a gallery or museum of people's stories like the stories of migrant workers, the refugees, the trainees, student workers, etc. to learn more about their issues and to further work on upholding the rights of people.

The visit to Japan also inspired me to make a new painting and poem entitled "Sirkulo ng Impukang Gahamang Kalayo," (The Cycle of Addiction from the Saving Fire) about the misgivings of being a migrant worker.¹¹

I am working hard, creating artworks from my heart and believing that someday women migrant workers will be treated equally anywhere in the world.

Endnotes

1 Transnational children refer to children whose parents have different nationalities like Japanese-Filipino children (JFCs).

2 YLLANG Montenegro, "DALOY, Wealth of Batis-AWARE Women," World Pulse, 28 July 2018, www.worldpulse.com/community/users/yllang/posts/88289.

3 Montenegro, *ibid*.

4 Photo of two issues of Daloy magazine from yllangmontenegro, www.instagram.com/p/BpVhkrhRc2/.

5 Photo of mural taken from SALA website, <http://kobe-sala.asia/2018/11/27/cecil%E3%81%A8sala%E3%80%82%E3%82%A8%E3%83%B3%E3%83%91%E3%83%AF%E3%83%BC%E3%83%A1%E3%83%B3%E3%83%88%E3%81%AE%E9%80%A3%E9%8E%96%E3%81%AF%E4%B8%96%E7%95%8C%E3%81%A7%E8%B5%B7%E3%81%93%E3%82%8B%E3%80%82/>.

6 Daniel Awigra, "Asian Women Migrant Workers Offers Food to Cure Homesickness in Kobe Restaurant," Magdalene, <https://magdalene.co/story/asian-women-migrant-workers-offers-food-to-cure-homesickness-in-kobe-restaurant>.

7 For information on some of my colleagues at ETA see YLLANG Montenegro, “The Power of 12: The Artists and their creations,” 18 May 2018, www.worldpulse.com/community/users/o813freak/campaign-updates/85687.

8 Berta, www.artrepresent.com/yllang.

9 Other art exhibitions and publications

ART EXHIBITIONS:

“My Prayer,” Beyond Borders Solidarity Arts and Crafts Mercadito in collaboration with Las Adelitas Art Collectives, in celebration of International Migrants Day in Oakland, California (December 2016);

“Ang Mga Bata” (The Children), BLTX Better Living Through Xeroxography, Quezon City (October 2016); 2nd National Family Court Summit, Supreme Court of the Philippines (December 2016);

“Empowerment Through Art, Organized and Curated Community Exhibit,” in collaboration with BUKLOD TAO Organization: OUR STORY EXHIBIT, San Mateo, Rizal (16 December 2017 – 30 January 2018);

“GGSSG: Gandang Ganda Sa Sariling Gawa,” exhibitor at Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila (24 March 2018);

“ETA: Pop Up Art Exhibit” in collaboration with Batis-AWARE and NBDB National Book Development Board, Plaza Moriones, Fort Santiago, Manila (23 April 2018);

ArtSpire: An exhibit featuring self-taught artist and formally trained artists from all over the Philippines, Start 101 Gallery, Quezon city (12 – 25 July 2018);

Empowerment Through Art Exhibit: Share your Blessings, Share your HeART, in collaboration with Homenet Cooperative Philippines and Felicidad Restaurant, Quezon City (11 August 11 2018 – 11 March to 2019);

“KASIBULAN: Colors of September,” Cadis Art Gallery, Pasig City (1 – 14 September 2018);

Empowerment Through Art : *Daloy* 2 book launching and E.T.A. illustrations and painting exhibit, in collaboration with Batis AWARE, Youth and Beauty Brigade and Gantala Press, Quezon City (20 October 2018 - 20 March 2019);

Contributing artist for 2019 Ibon Foundation Planner (January 2019);

“ARTIMONAN 2019: Likhang Sining para sa Kalikasan,” an exhibit for a cause for Grades 4 – 12 students in Atimonan, Quezon province (26 May 2019);

“Isyu hindi Kandidato: What food system shall we grow?,” a public mural making with the community in collaboration with Good Food Community and Green Peace, at Good Food Sundays, Shaw Bvd. Pasig City (5 May 2019);

“The Making of Hardin ni Isko,” a public mural making with the community at Brgy. Ugong, Pasig City (21 April 2019);

“Empowerment Through Art meets Dakila,” Art talk with Ms. Sandra Torrijos at UP Center for Women’s and Gender Studies, UP Diliman Quezon City;

“Empowering Artists, Art Exhibit and Talk,” Start 101 Gallery, Quezon City (2 – 22 April 2019).

PUBLICATIONS:

Editor, Project Coordinator, Layout and cover design, *Daloy*, A collection of writings by Filipino migrant women, Youth and Beauty Brigade and Gantala Press, September 2018;

Contributing illustrator and cover artist, *Daloy*, A collection of writings by Filipino migrant women, Youth and Beauty Brigade, August 2016.

10 The series of meetings was held in Japan under the project entitled “International Labor Migration and the Role of Civil Society in Asia” of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. For more information, see “Migrant labor and human rights: building connections between civil society in Japan and Southeast Asia,” Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 11 January 2019, www.spf.org/en/spfnews/information/20190111_01.html.

11 Yllang Montenegro, “A Mission for Change,” World Pulse, 12 January 2019, www.worldpulse.com/community/users/yllang/posts/89535.